In college football, often times running backs have to wait their turn, so to speak. Teams generally prefer to build depth with starting running backs as upperclassmen, while younger backs have time to grow and mentor under veterans.

That’s not the case this season for Montana State University-Northern red-shirt freshman tailback Zach McKinley. And while he’s already been waiting a long time for his chance to shine, and he got off to a strong start through Northern's first two games, McKinley announced his presence with authority in Northern’s home debut.

The 5-11, 205-pound bruiser from CMR in Great Falls racked up 202 yards and two touchdowns in Northern’s 45-27 win over Eastern Oregon Saturday at Blue Pony Stadium. And with career highs in both yards and carries, McKinley certainly helped the Lights’ offense get on track.

But it isn’t just the numbers he put up Saturday which are so impressive about McKinley, who would have saw playing time a season ago if it wasn’t for a leg injury which forced him to miss the 2012 campaign, it’s his running style and maturity which is really impressive.

McKinley broke off seven different runs Saturday of 10 yards or longer, he had 16 broken tackles and he found holes to run through behind a big offensive line. And as a result, the Lights’ ground game was jump-started into high gear.

“He’s great, he actually gets me yelled out all the time in film,” Senior wide out Orin Johnson, who had a career day himself Saturday, said of McKinley. “You never know when he’s down because he runs so hard and keeps breaking tackles, and you find yourself looking around sometimes because he’s still going and you think the play is over. He’s doing a great job, and he ran really hard today.”

Last spring, Northern found itself without a starting tailback returning for the first time in four years after Stephen Silva, MSU-N’s all-time leading rusher graduated. But the tide quickly turned for McKinley and fellow tailback Jai Johnson (who was injured Saturday). They both performed well in spring and had a spirited battle for the starting job in fall camp. And on Saturday, McKinley showed why the MSU-N rushing game is good hands as he came up just 28 yards shy of Silva’s single-game rushing record, which he set last year against Rocky Mountain College.

Wrecking Ball

Zach McKinley, who’s brother was a star at Northern as well, wasn’t the only running back turning heads Saturday afternoon in Northern’s resounding win over the Mountaineers at Blue Pony Stadium.
Another freshman, tailback Mario Gobbato made a debut Northern fans won’t soon forget. With Jai Johnson injured early in the first quarter, Gobbato got a chance to spell McKinley, and he didn’t disappoint.

Overall, he carried nine times for 47 yards, but two plays certainly stood out.

Early in the second quarter, Gobbato, a 5-8, 175-pound speedster from Blaine, Wash., went off right tackle and wound up carrying the entire Eastern Oregon defense with him. In all, he recorded six broken tackles on the play and still he wasn’t down. With what seemed like 20 EOU players on his back, the whistle blew and though the play was dead, Gobbato's legs were still churning, and he never did hit the ground.

Then, in the third quarter, Gobbato made a little more history for himself, scoring on a short touchdown run, again breaking tackles in the process. He joined Silva as a true freshman running back at Northern to score a TD.

"We did a good job driving the ball all the way down the field, and all we had left to do was punch it in, Gobbato said of his first career TD. "The offensive line did a great job. And no, I wasn’t expecting this much playing time, but when Jai (Johnson) went down I got a chance. Zach (McKinley) was kind of cramping up so they put me in, and I knew we were going to try and punch the ball in on the ground. You always have to be ready.

"Coach always tells us to keep our feet moving and to fall forward for as many yards as possible,” he added about his big run in the first half. I definitely need to be a balanced runner. I need to be able to pass block, run with power, and use my speed at this level.”

Together, McKinley and Gobatto helped Northern pile up nearly 300 yards on the ground and as a duo, they averaged almost eight yards per carry on Saturday.

It’s safe to say, Northern’s ground game is in good hands for a long time to come.

No Idea, No Problem

Going into Saturday’s game, Eastern Oregon had already played three quarterbacks this season. And while the EOU depth chart listed red-shirt freshman Zach Bartlow as the starter, Idaho transfer Dominique Blackmon got the nod for head coach Tim Camp’s Mounties. And though Blackmon played well, Camp wound up playing four different QB’s throughout the contest.

But it didn’t seem to matter which QB was one he field, though Blackmon is an imposing presence at 6-6, 250 pounds, Northern’s defense was up to the task. The Lights pitched shutouts in the first and third quarters, and sacks EOU’s four QB’s four times on the day.

MSU-N’s has now held teams scoreless in seven quarters of football this season, and the Lights are getting contributions from all over the field.

Sweet Redemption

For almost an entire game, the Lights out-played Eastern Oregon last September at Community Stadium in LaGrande., Ore. But a fourth-quarter drive by EOU resulted in a game-winning field goal, and it sent the Lights to their sixth straight loss against the Mounties.

Saturday in Havre, that streak was emphatically snapped as Northern routed the Mounties 45-27. MSU-N did it in all three phases and didn’t need to go down to the wire to get its revenge. The Lights racked up over 600 yards of total offense, held EOU to under 100 yards rushing, and made big plays (a fake punt and a Jordan Reuschoff FG) on special teams.

All-in-all, that's a complete-game performance and was certainly a great way to end a losing streak.

"I thought, for most of the game, we played pretty well in all phases,” Northern head coach Mark Samson said. “We were pretty efficient today on offense, we got some good stops on defense and we made a lot of big plays. It’s nice to see us play as well as we did in all phases.”
Because of the new Frontier Conference scheduling, which took effect last season, EOU and Northern now only meet once a year, which means the Mounties will have to wait until 2014 to get revenge. Or, the Lights will have to wait a full year to start a winning streak of their own.